

April 25, 2007: "Tibet and Religious Freedom in China"

Statement by Felice D. Gaer, Chair

Congressional Human Rights Caucus Briefing

April 25, 2007

As I was preparing my testimony, my mind went back six years to a truly telling meeting. Two fellow Commissioners and I were taking part in the China-U.S. Human Rights dialogue, and we of course raised a lot of questions about China's human rights practices.

I brought up the case of Gendun Choekyi Nyima, the Panchen Lama, and asked why in spite of entreaties from so many people, from Members of Congress, statesmen, diplomats, NGOs, ordinary people, had there been not a single opportunity for any independent observer to see him or his family.

The answer was the same as always. First of all, he was not the Panchen Lama. Secondly, there was the need to protect the privacy of the child. But this explanation was delivered in the most condescending way, the most denigrating way, and it was crystal clear to us that privacy is about the only right the Chinese government could claim to be protecting in this case, because it has trampled every other right that young boy-now a young man-has.

If the state ever had the obligation to protect the Panchen Lama's privacy as a minor, that obligation expires today, on his 18th birthday.

The United States and its allies must insist again that China allow the Panchen Lama to meet freely with independent international observers.

The Chinese government has made it clear that the rights of individuals are not fully protected and the only rights fully respected are the rights the state grants itself.

Also, the state will forcibly impose its own decisions on matters of religious doctrine and practice.

We saw this time and again during the Commission delegation's trip to China in August 2005, when we visited not only Beijing but also Lhasa, Kashgar, Urumqi, Chengdu and Shanghai.

We found that religious belief and practice was growing in China. But we also found that the Chinese government was eager to manage and restrict religious activity and repress any activity that could not be controlled.

The Chinese legal system does not fully protect those whose religious practice it classifies as "abnormal," "splittist," or "illegal," or the groups that it chooses to define as "evil cults."

Most religious activity in China today can be considered either "illegal" or a "threat" to national security by the government-including that of Tibet Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, unregistered Protestants and Catholic communities, and spiritual movements such as the Falun Gong. Vague national security provisions continue to be used abundantly to imprison those whose beliefs challenge government priorities.

In the past year, the Commission has seen a further, marked deterioration in conditions of religious freedom. Nearly every week, we receive reports of raids on unregistered religious gatherings, destruction of religious venues, and multiple cases of arrest, detention, and harassment of religious leaders. The State Department reports that "thousands" of Chinese religious believers were detained at least briefly in the past year.

In the year before the Beijing Olympics, Chinese authorities seem to have raised the stakes, drawing a distinct line between what they term "normal" religious activity and what they term illegal religious activity. Those religious groups that are viewed as illegal-either because they refuse to join one of the seven government-sanctioned religious groups, or because they are considered to be "evil cults," or are viewed as supporting so-called "separatist" activities-face continued pressure, harassment, arrest, and other abuse.

The repression of religious freedom in Tibet illustrates the great divide between the Chinese government's rhetoric and its practice.

In recent years, repression of Tibetan Buddhism has intensified, as Beijing has pursued its campaign to "stamp out terrorism, separatism, and extremism." Officials justify that campaign with the dubious claim that the Tibetan people's devotion to the Dalai Lama, along with other integral tenets of their faith, hinder economic development or even lead to the support of terrorism.

Chinese government officials told the Commission delegation that the Dalai Lama's influence had to be eliminated to protect so-called "social harmony"-their term-and to raise the standard of living in Tibet and other regions with Tibetan Buddhist populations. "Tibet cannot be developed by chanting," one official told us.

To promote its vision for the political and economic development of Tibet, the Chinese government retains tight control over religious activity and places of worship. The religious activities of monks and nuns are monitored and they are required to participate in patriotic education programs run by the Party and by the Ministry of Public Security. The selection and training of Buddhist religious leaders is subject to government approval. Children are not allowed to receive religious education until they have completed nine years of compulsory public education.

Displaying photos of the Dalai Lama is prohibited and those caught with any are imprisoned. According to Chinese government figures, more than 100 Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns are in prison.

There are increasing signs that China is actively trying to prevent Tibetans from leaving the country, as well as urging the forcible repatriation of those who seek asylum in Nepal or India.

In September, Chinese border guards opened fire on a group of 70 Tibetans, most of them monks, nuns, and children-all unarmed. They were seeking refuge in India to pursue religious education not permitted in Tibet. They killed a 17-year-old nun, and took several members of the group into custody, where they were reportedly tortured and forced to perform hard labor.

As the 2008 Olympics in Beijing approach, the international spotlight on China will become increasingly intense. It is up to the U.S. and its allies to vigorously advocate that China finally end the systematic and egregious human rights violations it may try to hide behind a façade of Olympic goodwill.

The Commission has made specific recommendations to improve U.S. human rights diplomacy, establish priorities for public diplomacy, and create new rule of law programs in China. We would be happy to work with Members of Congress and their staff to ensure implementation of those recommendations.

The relationship between Washington and Beijing is among the most important bilateral relationships that our government currently maintains. China's rise will affect U.S. foreign policy options for the next century.

Therefore, as Washington pursues trade and security interests with China, it is vital that the Chinese government pursue policies that uphold its commitment to universally acclaimed and recognized human rights, including the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief, for the Tibetan people and for all the people of China. By setting and pursuing these priorities, U.S.-China relations and bilateral cooperation will be strengthened for the long term.

(END)